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ABSTRACT

Few answers are to be found in the research literature about what happens to traditional academic subjects in school restructuring. This paper provides an analysis of the U.S. social studies curriculum and a description of how it has fared in the public high schools of New York City (NYC). A research project conducted during 1994, 1995, and 1996 investigated the status of social studies in the public high schools of NYC. The paper reports the contrasts uncovered through the survey research, observations, and interviews with teachers and administrators in social studies at both traditional, comprehensive high schools and small, restructured secondary schools. Specifically, it examines the ways in which social studies is being taught in these two types of institutions. Contains 9 notes. (BT)

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What Does School Restructuring Mean for Traditional School Subjects? The Case of Social Studies[1]

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What happens to traditional academic subjects in school restructuring? Few answers to this question are to be found in the research literature, which is more focused on the process of restructuring, its effects on teachers, school-community relations, graduation rates, basic skills in reading and math, and so forth. Advocates of restructuring may be correct that it is good for schools, but what effect does it have on traditional school subjects?

In this paper, we provide an analysis of one cornerstone of the American curriculum, social studies, as it has recently fared in the public high schools of New York City (hereafter, NYC). As in many other urban school systems, NYC has struggled with providing an adequate education to all its students. One of the main strategies intended to accomplish this goal is restructuring. But what does restructuring actually mean for a subject such as social studies? How similar to and different from each other are social studies in traditional and restructuring schools? Specifically, what is the state of the organization of the curriculum and methods of instruction, and what are the characteristics of the teachers, in traditional and restructuring high schools in NYC?

The Research Study

During the years 1994, 1995, and 1996, we conducted a research project investigating the status of social studies in the public high schools of NYC. In recent years, growing concern has been expressed at the paucity of knowledge about social

studies in urban settings.[2] The size of the NYC school system--over one million students--is unique, but its diversity is characteristic of urban school systems nationally. By 1990, close to 30% of the NYC school population was foreign born. Heavy migration over several decades has added new forms of linguistic and cultural diversity to what was an already diverse population. Since it is anticipated that one in three students nationally will be of minority background in the near future, the NYC experience may in many ways be a preview of what will happen over the next decade in public schools across the country.

School restructuring is not new to NYC. It began in the 1970s with the alternative school movement. This developed into the recent creation of small schools, many of which have been sponsored by organizations such as the Coalition of Essential Schools and the New Vision initiatives in New York State. In this paper, we report the contrasts we uncovered through our survey research, observations, and interviews with teachers and administrators in social studies at both traditional, comprehensive high schools and small, restructured secondary schools. Specifically, we examine the ways in which social studies is being taught in these two types of institutions.

In general, we have found that many restructured schools have substituted "humanities" (typically a mix of English and history) for English and social studies. In such schools, it seems clear that one subject in the mix gets shortchanged. This combination of subjects, as was feared as long ago as the 1930s,[3] runs the risk of shortchanging one subject or the other. Our findings suggest this fear is warranted: what gets emphasized in humanities reflects the specialization of the teacher responsible for teaching humanities. If the teacher's background is in English, social studies gets shortchanged and vice versa. Moreover, we discovered that teachers in both restructured and traditional, comprehensive

high schools believe there will be greater emphasis on interdisciplinary curriculum in the future. If this is true, and if the trend is national in scope, concerns exist for the effect on traditional school subjects such as social studies.

Methodology

The primary method of this investigation was a lengthy questionnaire. It was piloted and refined with a small sample of secondary schools and then sent to all public high schools in NYC (N=180). This questionnaire was divided into three main parts: background data about the school, including size of school, teacher background, tracking; questions about curriculum and instruction, including scope, sequence, and extent of interdisciplinary instruction; and questions about professional issues, such as staff development opportunities, mentoring, and membership in professional organizations.

The data reported in this paper rest on responses to the survey questionnaires completed and returned by social studies and humanities administrators at 59 NYC public high schools for a response rate of 38%. Nineteen responses came from the 39 schools initially categorized as "small schools"and 40 from the schools initially categorized as "large schools." Response rates differed significantly: 49% of small schools returned completed questionnaires while only 28% of large schools did so.

For the purposes of this study, this sample of cases, while not randomly drawn, is assumed to be representative of the universe of NYC high schools because there is no indication of the presence of response bias.[4] Further, although we are not asserting that the results of this study hold scientific validity, we did corroborate the survey results with other data sources such as numerous interactions with many teachers at these schools over the last five years.

Our primary research interest was the status of social studies in New York City high schools. In addition, we were interested in mapping the differences in social studies curriculum, instruction, and practitioners between the large, comprehensive high schools and the small, restructured schools. We did a cross-tabulation of responses to questions about social studies practice and practitioners by type of school.

Qualitative research included observations and interviews at a small sample of schools of each type. Lengthy interviews were conducted with eight seasoned teachers split evenly between traditional and restructured schools. These interviews dealt with a range of issues, especially the trend towards interdisciplinary curriculum and student-centered methods of social studies instruction in the restructured schools as contrasted with traditional reliance on the developmental lesson and survey courses in the large high schools. A series of classroom observations were also conducted in three traditional and three restructured schools. Over 100 hundred supervisors' reports concerning the roughly 30 to 40 student teachers placed annually by the Teachers College Program in Social Studies in NYC high schools over the last five years supplemented the data collected expressly for this study.

What is a restructured school in New York City?

While large comprehensive high schools continue to serve the great majority of NYC's more than one million students, small schools, sometimes labeled "restructured," "alternative,"or "theme" schools, have lately garnered a great deal of attention as urban educational experiments. There is an apparent consensus among educational policymakers that these experiments are working and will continue to grow even though concerns have arisen about the relative costs of smaller schools as compared with larger ones.[5] For

example, at a June 1993 press conference held to draw the public's attention to the conversion of Julia Richman High School into six new high schools, NYC Board of Education President Carol Gresser talked about the new schools. She predicted that restructured schools would "set a direction for effective school reform in New York City for years to come."[6] Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that all of NYC's large comprehensive schools will give way to a system of smaller restructured schools. The realities of limited space, teacher shortages, prohibitive start-up costs, and bureaucratic inertia all make this transformation unlikely.

The current uses of the term "restructuring" have little to do with the first wave of creation of new schools during the 1970s. The "alternative" schools, as they were called at that time, signaled the recognition that many students simply were not succeeding in traditional academic environments. These alternative schools supplemented the vocational schools established over the last century for students interested in career preparation rather than college. Alternative schools were considered "schools of last resort" for those who might otherwise drop out without gaining a high school diploma. Their lower faculty-to-student ratios, greater attention to academic and personal counseling, and limited academic offerings allowed teachers and administrators to focus their energies on helping students who were not "making it" in traditional environments.

In the 1980s and 1990s competing views of the meaning of systemic educational reform have arisen. In these circumstances of conflicting policy agendas, restructuring has come to mean many different things, especially in the urban context. For example, restructuring has been used to apply to:

> the market mechanism of choice, or teacher professionalization and empowerment, or decentralization and school site management, or involving parents more in their children's education, or national standards curriculum with tests to match, or deregulation, or new forms of accountability, or basic changes in curriculum and instruction, or some or all of these in combination.[7]

Perhaps Fred Newmann's view of restructuring most closely resembles what we uncovered in NYC. He explains that school restructuring must be evaluated in terms of schools' place along "a continuum of departures from conventional practice."[8] In urban areas, restructuring has included some of these features, but has also continued to reflect the impetus behind the alternative schools movement: that is, the effort to redress the chronic absenteeism and high level of dropouts often found in the large comprehensive high schools.

Restructured schools in NYC vary tremendously in the degree to which they have undergone systemic change, especially change affecting curriculum and instruction. Some restructured schools resemble traditional, comprehensive high schools in most ways except for size. The differences often are more of degree than kind, with social studies curriculum, instruction, and organization of time the same in both environments. We were surprised that in some cases the effects of restructuring on social studies seemed imperceptible. In other cases, however, the effects of restructuring on social studies were pronounced. The more dramatic effects were found in schools that had gone through a comprehensive form of school restructuring, especially those affiliated with the Coalition of Essential Schools or the New Vision program. In such settings, social studies was sometimes amalgamated with English into an interdisciplinary curriculum called "humanities."

In analyzing the questionnaires, we used size of student population as well as background data to distinguish between the two types that we came to call "traditional" schools and "restructured" schools. Those with fewer than 1000 students were generally labeled "restructured," and those with more than 1000 students "traditional." The exceptions to this designation were three cases of schools with fewer than 1000 students where administrators described their institutions as "comprehensive" high schools.

Among traditional high schools, student population ranged from 700 to 4300; the mean size was 2618 and the median 2625. Among restructured schools, size ranged from 100 to 700 students; the mean was 321 and the median 289. Using the cutoff size of 1000 students along with other descriptive features did provide profiles of two distinct types of high schools that tended towards correspondingly different approaches to social studies curriculum and instruction.

Research Findings

Thus far, we have outlined some of the difficulties in defining "restructuring" and provided a context for the evolution of two broad types of high schools in NYC. Now we turn to a more detailed examination of our research findings. Given the significance assigned to school restructuring in the literature, we began our study anticipating marked differences in curriculum and instruction across traditional and restructured schools. As noted previously, however, we discovered that in many restructured schools the effects on social studies were minimal. In these cases, the only difference between the two types of schools was size. In some restructured schools, however, social studies had been merged into humanities and was being taught by teachers without any professional preparation in social studies.

We will highlight three general findings that reflect the differences we discovered between traditional and restructured schools and their approach to social studies: 1) organization of curriculum; 2) instructional methods; 3) practitioners' backgrounds.

First, the organization of the curriculum differed across traditional and restructured schools. While 77% of traditional high schools have a social studies department, this was true for only 44% of restructured high schools. Twenty-eight percent of restructured high schools substitute a humanities department for a social studies department; the rest have a social studies department. Tracking practices also distinguish between the two types of schools. Fifty percent of the traditional schools say they track their students in social studies, while only 6% of the restructured schools do.

Other differences exist in the relationship of the two types of schools to statewide testing and curriculum policies. Since the late 19th century, these statewide, criterion-referenced tests in core subject areas, called "Regents examinations," must be passed in order for students to gain a Regents diploma. All of the traditional schools use the Regents examinations in social studies while only 78% of the restructured schools do. The other restructured schools use alternative means of assessment, especially portfolios. New York State requires four years of social studies in the Regents curriculum: two years of world history, one year of American history, and a semester each of civics and economics. All of the traditional high schools, but only 56% of the restructured schools, follow the Regents curriculum completely or partially. Eleven percent of the restructured schools do not follow the Regents curriculum at all: half of those affiliated with the Coalition and a quarter of those affiliated with New Vision initiatives.

In the case of Coalition schools, this divergence from the state curriculum is consistent with their curricular precept that "less is more." Moreover, these schools offer courses similar to electives now commonly found in many colleges, such as courses on slavery, the Columbian conquest of the Americas, or social justice. In the case of the New Vision schools, where a theme such as "leadership," "the future," or "environmental studies" has served as the founding aegis of the school, curriculum is sometimes shaped to reflect this emphasis. Overall, in restructured schools 83% indicate that they use teacher-generated curriculum in whole or in part, with 68% answering that they have a "great deal of latitude" in devising their own curriculum in social studies. By contrast, only 17% of those in traditional high schools say they have a "great deal of latitude" in this regard.

Further, restructured schools have moved decisively to embrace interdisciplinary curriculum. Twenty-two percent of the respondents from restructured schools indicate they spend almost two-thirds of their time on interdisciplinary curriculum, chiefly by merging social studies with English. Another 29% of the restructured schools spend between one- to two-thirds of their time in interdisciplinary work. These high levels contrast sharply with traditional schools: three-fifths of traditional schools devote under one-third of their instructional time to interdisciplinary work and none of them report spending over two-thirds of their time this way.

In response to a question asking whether such interdisciplinary studies shortchange social studies, 100% of the respondents affiliated with social studies departments from restructured schools answered "yes," but only 50% of those in traditional schools agreed. Respondents situated in humanities departments in the restructured schools, however, felt the disciplinary mix to be balanced between literature and social studies. These responses

are hard to interpret except perhaps to speculate that those in social studies departments may be more likely to be trained in social studies and those in humanities trained in English, resulting in differences in perspective on this issue. Finally, in response to a question concerning whether interdisciplinary trends will increase in the future, respondents from both restructured (71%) and traditional schools (75%) answered in the affirmative.

The second area on which we report has to do with instructional methods in social studies. In NYC, the "developmental" lesson has been the standard protocol for teaching social studies for decades. Loosely based on Herbartian ideas about teaching, the developmental lesson focuses on eliciting answers about subject matter from students that involve the use of higher order thinking skills.[9] This method sometimes devolves into mere recitation interspersed with short lectures by the teacher, especially in the hands of an unskilled practitioner. Sixty percent of traditional schools cite the developmental lesson as their dominant instructional style, with another 23% characterizing inquiry this way. The rest (17%) of the traditional schools use a variety of methods to teach social studies. By contrast, 63% of restructured schools rely chiefly on group work or cooperative learning as the dominant methods of instruction. Overall, teachers at the two types of schools employ distinctly different modalities for teaching social studies.

Methods of instruction, of course, are affected by the time available for instruction. Again, we found two patterns. In 84% of traditional schools, classes run for between 40 and 43 minutes. In restructured schools, only about one-third report periods of this length. About another third report periods of 60 to 80 minutes, with the final third reporting periods lasting over 100 minutes.

Finally, the qualifications and background of social studies and humanities teachers in the two types of schools differ markedly. In traditional schools, nearly all social studies teachers are certified in the field. By contrast, in restructured schools the number of those teaching social studies who are certified in the subject varies somewhat. About one-half of these schools report that about three-fourths of their social studies teachers are certified in the field. The other half of the restructured schools indicate that only a minority of those teaching social studies in their schools are actually certified in this area.

Another noticeable difference in personnel has to do with the relative lack of experience of those teaching in the restructured schools. Thirty-seven percent had less than five years of teaching experience. In traditional schools, only about half that number (around 20%) had under five years experience. In the mid-range years of experience, between 5 and 20 years, the two types of schools were closer. At the high end of experience, differences were once again discernible. Only 12% of those teaching in restructured schools had between 20 and 30 years of experience, while 31% of those teaching in traditional schools had this much experience. No teachers in alternative schools had more than 30 years experience but 8% of those in traditional schools did. These different levels of teacher experience were not, however, reflected in differences in academic credentials. In the traditional schools, 76% of the social studies teachers had M.A.'s or M.A.'s plus 30 credits, while 73% of those in restructured schools had comparable credentials.

The questionnaire asked administrators about what beginning teachers need in order to be successful in their schools. The responses indicate differing conceptions of social studies education and the qualifications of those teaching social studies in the two

types of schools. The question was posed: what do new teachers need most if they are to be successful in your school? Three possible answers were given: more knowledge of content, more skill in lesson planning, and greater facility with alternative teaching methods. Only 16% of the respondents from restructured schools felt social studies content to be most important while 54% of those in traditional schools gave this response. Eleven percent of administrators in the restructured schools and 32% of those in traditional schools cited lesson planning skills. Thirty-nine percent of the restructured school respondents named alternative teaching methods as most important but only 7% of the administrators at the traditional schools chose this answer. Whatever the priorities of the two types of schools, however, large schools provide more regular opportunities for both staff development and mentoring of new teachers.

Discussion

Restructured and traditional schools differ in the three general areas just discussed. The degree to which any individual traditional school shares features with any given restructuring school varies. But considered as groups, the two types of schools differ in the structuring of time, teacher latitude in curriculum and teaching methods, levels of teaching experience, and the degree to which interdisciplinary curriculum is adopted by the schools.

Teachers in small schools are more likely to have greater control over the curriculum and more flexibility in the use of time. Although both types of schools appear to allow social studies teachers some freedom to supplement or substitute course materials with those of their own choosing, teachers in small schools have greater autonomy in this regard. Teachers in small schools also have greater latitude to deviate from the prescribed

course of study in social studies. Indeed it is less likely that there will be a prescribed course of study.

The use of time in small schools also is likely to differ from large schools. Extended periods support more collaborative work cultures for discussion of students or preparation of interdisciplinary, team-taught curriculum. Moreover, a substantial majority of large schools have class periods for social studies running one hour or less, but about half of small schools have classes lasting for more than one hour.

As we noted at the outset, by criteria such as student retention, small schools are often judged a successful experiment in urban education. Some other dimensions of their "success," however, have largely been unstudied. Although we can hardly rectify this situation in one paper, we can identify a few issues for further research and policymakers. First, essential social studies goals and skills may be neglected in the teaching of humanities. This concern is exacerbated given that many teachers of humanities are uncertified in social studies. Second, given the heavy professional demands placed upon a relatively inexperienced group of teachers staffing small schools, it is disturbing that these schools lag significantly behind large schools in both regular staff development offerings and provision of a mentoring system for their new teachers. Third, the small school movement would seem to call for systemic changes in teacher education and certification as well as school staffing. Such changes do not appear much in evidence; implementation has preceded serious consideration of what constitutes teacher competence in such settings.

In conclusion, this paper has been an attempt to map the landscape in restructuring of urban schools as they affect one school subject in one city. The process of restructuring

has been decentralized and this makes generalization difficult. It also may tell against the provision of the kinds of systemic supports required if small schools are to have the maximum possible chances for success. These schools seem vulnerable in a policy climate of national and statewide standards in traditional subjects tied to high stakes tests. Our findings suggest that serious attention is needed to both how restructured schools presently work and to policies and teacher education directed at assuring their effectiveness across a range of educational criteria.

Notes:

[1] Paper prepared for the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, April, 1999. We gratefully acknowledge the contributions of three doctoral students—Della Barr Brooks, Sherry Schwartz, and Richard Hoffman—to the data collection for this study. We are also grateful to Anthony Altucher who reviewed much of the relevant literature as part of his master's project.

[2] See Stephen J. Thornton, "Trends and Issues in Social Studies Curriculum," in *Social Studies Curriculum Resource Handbook* (Millwood, NY: Kraus International Publications, 1992); see also "Urban Issues Concern NCSS Board," *The Social Studies Professional: Newsletter for Members of the National Council for the Social Studies*, 148 (1998): p. 14.

[3] See James A. Michener, "The Problem of the Social Studies," in James A. Michener, *The Future of the Social Studies: Proposals for an Experimental Social-Studies Curriculum*, ed. James A. Michener (Cambridge, MA: National Council for the Social Studies, 1939), pp. 4-5.

[4] See Early Babbie, *Survey Research Methods* (Belmont CA: Wasdsworth Publishing Company, 1990), p. 182. Babbie notes that "a demonstrated lack of response bias is far more important than high response rate."

[5] See Peggy Farber, "Small Schools Work Best for Disadvantaged Students," *Harvard Education Letter* (March/April, 1998): pp. 6-8; see also Mary Anne Raywid, *Taking Stock: The Movement to Create Mini-Schools, Schools-within-Schools, and Separate Small Schools*, Urban Diversity Series, No. 108 (New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1996).

[6] *New York Times*, "Theme Schools Face Hurdles in Opening," June 19, 1993, A23:5.

[7] David Tyack, "'Restructuring' in Historical Perspective: Tinkering toward Utopia," *Teachers College Record*, 92, no. 2 (1990): pp. 170-171.

[8] Fred M. Newmann, "Introduction: The School Restructuring Study," in *Authentic Assessment: Restructuring Schools for Intellectual Quality*, ed. Fred M. Newmann (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996), p. 6.

[9] See Association of Teachers of Social Studies in the City of New York and United Federation of Teachers, *A Handbook for the Teaching of Social Studies*, 2nd ed., ed. William S. Dobkin, Joel Fischer, Bernard Ludwig, and Richard Koblinger (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1985), pp.18-21.

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